

ESSAI

Volume 14

Article 32

Spring 2016

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Recommended Citation

Skrobania, Jaime (2016) "Achieving School," *ESSAI*: Vol. 14 , Article 32.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol14/iss1/32>

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Achieving School

by Jaime Skrobania

(English 1102)

Going to college to get higher education can be a very exciting experience. Students who have just graduated from high school go to college to continue their education, or individuals who have not been in school for while may want go back to make their future better. Finishing college can be a rewarding and challenging experience, and getting that degree by putting in the effort of studying, homework, and passing difficult tests makes it worth it in the end. However, not all individuals find that experience worth it, especially when a person is afflicted with dyslexia. Dyslexia is a learning disability that affects a person's ability to read, write, spell and memorize, as well as to compute math problems. An adult with dyslexia may have had negative experiences in grammar and high school; for this reason, going to college can be a terrifying experience. Despite all of this, there are many different ways that they can succeed in college in spite of their diagnosis.

David Armstrong, a senior lecturer in Education at Edge Hill University, and Neil Humphrey, a teacher of Educational Psychology at the University of Manchester, wrote an article titled, "Reactions to a Diagnosis of Dyslexia among Students Entering Further Education: Development of the Resistance Accommodation' Model." This article details a study they conducted to explore and distinguish the psychological reactions of individuals "living with the label" of having dyslexia.

The purpose of Armstrong and Humphrey's study is to understand the reactions of individuals between the ages of 16 and 19 after discovering their diagnosis, and what the students had to say about it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty respondents participating. All participants were students who had been identified and diagnosed with dyslexia in the previous year. The researchers used a one-to-one interview with each student to obtain information by asking a different set of questions regarding their experience pertaining to their research topic on discovering the psychological reactions of their learning disability. This structured interview was used instead of the standard "yes or no" answers. Respondents were asked questions and encouraged to speak freely. This allowed the researchers to better understand what the interviewees' responses were from their experiences pertaining to the topic at hand.

The results of Armstrong and Humphrey's research showed that the discovery of the diagnosis caused the interviewee to have a resistance to their disability, as well as an unwillingness to accept the status of their dyslexia. One of the participants named Rebecca struggled with being connected to the term "dyslexia," and stated, "It's a sticker to put on people" (qtd. in Armstrong and Humphrey 98). Another participant, Jamie, claimed, "I don't see myself as being dyslexic" (98). This type of resistance showed that the term dyslexia was deeply embedded, and those that were interviewed could not see themselves accepting that they have dyslexia.

Once the students discover their diagnosis, as well as live with the label of having dyslexia, many of them deal with low self-esteem issues. When a student is suffering with these, it can erode their confidence to succeed and lead to poor academic performance, as well as other areas in their lives. Suanne Gibson, from the University of Plymouth, and Lynne Kendall, from the Liverpool John Moore's University, researched the experiences these students have in higher education. In their article, "Stories from School: Dyslexia and Learners, Voice on Factors Impacting on Achievement," their purpose was to discover and understand from dyslexic adult students their experiences in school, what challenges they were facing, and how they managed to succeed with their studies.

Gibson and Kendall interviewed five students, and were given various stories and anecdotes

from their school experiences in their first year at their universities. The research was based on a semi-structured interview to the remaining five adult students, and the students provided information on what they did to succeed, as well as how they felt during their time in school. The information these students provided to Gibson and Kendall showed various settings and differentiated teaching practices, teachers' attitudes, peers and their relationships, as well as feelings of failure and low self-esteem. They also concluded that, based on a student's placement in a lower academic level compared to their peers, such placement itself can cause the student to lose motivation to succeed. One of the individuals interviewed, a woman by the name of Susan, explained her experience being in a lower setting and stated, "I was in the bottom set for like Math and English and they just thought that I was not dumb, but not as clever as everyone else and I just had no motivation to do anything..." (qtd. in Gibson and Kendall 190). This type of feeling students may have indicates that if they are not comparable to everyone else, their self-esteem can decline, believing they are not smart enough to succeed in school.

Dealing with the teachers at the school also had an effect on the students' self-esteem. Teachers could have a negative outlook and show low expectations to these students, which can give the impression to the students that they are not being supported. Another individual interviewed named Zoe, mentioned to the researchers how lack of empathy from the teachers can be frustrating: "I think I really wanted to succeed and get good grades and I found it hard and nobody would listen because the teachers kept saying either I was lazy, and my grammar structure was poor" (qtd. in Gibson and Kendra 190). Peers and relationships can have an impact on an adult dyslexic student as well. Most of those interviewed had experience with verbal abuse from people who were unaware or had no knowledge of the disability.

It should, however, be noted that dyslexic students can find some positivity in the form of support from peers who did understand. Caroline, another woman interviewed, explained to Gibson and Kendal from her perspective how her friends had supported her with having dyslexia, saying, "My best friends, they were really good, they always stood by me and everything and never said anything like that would hurt my feelings about being dyslexic..." (191). Caroline also mentioned how some of her friends weren't as supportive or understanding with her disability: "I know some of my friends were not like, I don't know, why I hung around them really because they just seemed to take the mickey out of me sometimes..." (191). This strongly suggests that this can cause both a positive and negative affect for an adult dyslexic student to deal with.

Another experience adults with dyslexia can have is the fear of failure. Struggling to do so well in school will get them to fear not being smart enough to succeed in their academic studies. Calling back to Susan, she was diagnosed as a dyslexic in her first year of college, after finding out from her tutors that essays she submitted had several grammatical errors and poor spelling. After she was asked how she felt, Susan responded with, "I just felt like I was thicker than everyone else because everyone seemed to be getting A's and stuff, and I was still getting D's. It just made me feel like I just didn't want to do it anymore" (qtd. in Gibson and Kendall 192). This fear of failure erodes confidence to complete assignments and studies, which can ultimately lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

With the fear of failure, negative responses from peers, teacher's opinions, and placement tests, these all can become very stressful and discouraging for the adult student with dyslexia. Students with dyslexia do wish especially that their teachers will understand them more. Cecilia Nielsen, from the Department of Social and Behavioral Studies from University West (in Sweden), wrote an article addressing this titled, "The Most Important Thing: Students with Reading and Writing Difficulties Talk about Their Experiences of Teachers' Treatment and Guidance." Based on the students' viewpoint, the article explains what they feel are the most important things a teacher can do to help. The students want their teachers to see them as individuals, and not solely by their various disabilities. A dyslexic student would often feel as if other people identify them only by their

disorder, rather than seeing them as a person with dreams, hopes, or feelings.

Some of the students in Nielson's study were adults who had returned to school in order to improve their reading and writing. One individual interviewed, Petra, told of the experience she had when she was in the 4th grade. She had to be pushed back into 3rd grade again because she was a very slow reader, about which she remembers feeling very angry and powerless. However, Petra also advised the researchers of a later experience with a teacher who had encouraged her to return to school when she reached adulthood. She was in a situation where she felt as if she had to change her life, and she came to learn about a school that offered a special writing and reading program. When she contacted the school and met with the teacher, Petra felt like this teacher was very empathetic and really listened to her needs. She explained, "that was the first time I felt like somebody really understood me" (qtd. in Nielson 558). She felt as if the teacher knew what it was like to have dyslexia. Seeing and identifying with individuals with dyslexia can create a comforting feeling that they are not alone. Another individual interviewed, Inga, told her story about a teacher she met when she decided to go back to school for a higher education. Inga decided to attend a course to help with her writing skills, and her teacher saw her struggles as well as her anxiety, and helped her slowly to become brave enough to learn how to spell words properly and improve her grammar.

Dyslexia can be very mild or extreme, and it's never the same from one individual to the next. One similar characteristic among all of these individuals is that they often struggle in school. After being diagnosed with dyslexia, it can feel like the end of the world to some people, but they can overcome their disability once they really understand what it is and what they need to do to help. With the help and support they need in order to succeed, adults with dyslexia can feel confident enough to know they can become successful enough, and know that they are smart enough to finish school.

Note

From my personal experience, I suffer from dyslexia, so for me going back to school was also terrifying. With help from counselors and tutors here at College of DuPage, and along with my friends and family, I feel that I have enough support to help me manage to succeed at getting my associate's degree. This research topic was very personal to me, because I know what it's like for students like me with a learning disability.

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